THE RELEVANCE OF "WELTLITERATUR"

Zhang Longxi (City University of Hong Kong)

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Weltliteratur as Goethe called for in the 1820s is now on the rise and invigorates literary studies in much of the world today. It is important to note that Goethe talked about the advent of *Weltliteratur* when he was reading a Chinese novel in translation, and that his appreciation of non-European literature formed the background for his cosmopolitan vision of poetry as universal. Much of comparative literature after Goethe has remained, however, largely Eurocentric, and even influential scholars proposing models for the study of world literature today are still, despite their good intentions, unable to rid themselves of Eurocentric biases and limitations. By revisiting Goethe's concept and the development of comparative literature since the nineteenth century, and by commenting on Pascale Casanova's understanding of the history of world literary centers and on Franco Moretti's center-and-periphery model in the development of the modern novel as a world literary genre, this essay calls for a truly global understanding of *Weltliteratur* as well as its relevance for our world today.

World literature is on the rise and invigorates literary studies everywhere, not only in the US and Europe, but also in China, Japan, India, and many other countries in other parts of the world. World literature is quickly developing into a new paradigm because its strength lies in the fact that it has always been a high-minded cosmopolitan vision for the study of different literary traditions rather than a newfangled theoretical trend that originates in a discipline outside literature, such as linguistics, anthropology, psychoanalysis, sociology, or philosophy, which eventually makes critical discourse so far removed from literature itself that it loses its specific nature as literary studies. Many scholars and critics have come to realize that excessive theorizing detached from literature has become a major problem today.

> To be a linguist these days, you do not have to know a lot of languages, despite the older meaning of the term *linguist*: in the last fifty or sixty years, linguistics has developed a set of antonomous research programs that do not involve engaging with language at that level of detail. Similarly at moments in the last few decades, it has seemed possible to make a career in literary studies without making sustained reference to works of literature.[1]

[1] Haun Saussy, "Exquisite Cadavers Stitched from Fresh Nightmares: Of Memes, Hives, and Selfish Genes", in: Haun Saussy (ed.), *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University, 2006, p. 12.

In this context, then, world literature provides a welcome opportunity to return to the reading of literature on a much larger scale than ever before. Whether 'close reading' or 'distant reading', the reading, appreciation, and interpretation of literature in a global context now offer new possibilities in both practical criticism and theoretical explorations. World literature reminds literary scholars that their business is, or should be, first and foremost, to make sense of literary works from different traditions in a global environment, beyond narrowly defined linguistic or national boundaries.

In a way the rise of world literature is also a revival of the concept of *Weltliteratur* as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe articulated it in the 1820's, and it is important to remember the circumstances under which Goethe conceptualized *Weltliteratur* and spoke of its advent. It is in his conversation with Johann Peter Eckermann, in talking about his reading of a Chinese novel in translation, that Goethe made the famous announcement that "[...] poetry is the universal possession of mankind. National literature is now rather an unmeaning term; the epoch of world literature is at hand, and every one must strive to hasten its approach."[2] Goethe's concept of poetry as universal made him not only a great poet in the European tradition, but also a poet of the world, and Goethe's universalism was not limited to the experience of European literature only. Perhaps we can detect here the influence of Johann Gottfried von Herder's idea of different voices of the people, articulated in different languages and literatures, for Goethe's concept encompasses the entire range of the world's literary expressions, including non-European ones, with their diversity and difference appreciated as much as their features of common humanity. It was precisely a sense of cultural affinities despite the strangeness of a foreign text that suggested to Goethe an underlying link that connected the literary works of the world's different nations to form one great *Weltliteratur*. Indeed, compared with most of his contemporaries, Goethe had a much wider range of interests in literary works outside Europe, as is demonstrated not only in his reading of a Chinese novel, but also in his appreciation of the Persian poet Hafiz, whose ghazals provided inspiration for Goethe to write his *West-östlicher Diwan*. Goethe's *Weltliteratur* is thus a vision of truly global dimensions.

Comparative literature as it started to develop in nineteenth-century Europe, however, was grounded on national literature and was methodologically limited to the study of influence and reception that could be established in historical and biographical terms, with a positivistic emphasis on what Jean-Marie Carré called *rapports de fait*.[3] Given the disciplinary prerequi-

[2] *Conversations of Goethe with Eckermann and Soret*, trans. and ed. by John Oxenford, London: George Bell & Sons, 1883, pp. 212-213.

[3] See Jean-Marie Carré's foreword to Marius-François Guyard, *La littérature comparée,* Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1951, pp. 5-6, here p. 5.

sites of linguistic competence and cultural affinities, and also the social and political condition of a time of Western imperialism and colonialism, comparative literature as it developed in the nineteenth century and the early twentieth did not fulfill the cosmopolitan vision articulated in Goethe's concept of *Weltliteratur*. The French style of *littérature comparée* with its emphasis on influence certainly made contributions to the study of literary history, the circulation and reception of literary works, the functions of intermediaries, translators, publishers, etc., but its conceptual foundation was national, even nationalistic, and it tended to focus on the influence of major writers in a major European language on writers in other traditions of somewhat lesser linguistic and cultural prestige. Since the sixteenth century, France had risen to become a powerful country with a strong sense of the prestige of the French language and literature, and a typically Gallocentric view of literature and culture exerted a significant influence on the French conceptualization of *littérature comparée*. Goethe, as Claudio Guillén notes, maintains that "there is no patriotic art and no patriotic science".[4] In contrast, as Marius-François Guyard argues, influence study is "*a French genre*".[5] He even included a diagram in a primer he wrote to identify the specifically French origin of influence on other literature, even to point out lacunae in scholarship to be filled up by future comparative work that should confirm the claims for French writers' global influence and reputation. Such patriotic pride, however, is not limited to French or European intellectuals, and we need to guard against such ethnocentric bias and a nationalistic tendency in scholarship, whether we are talking about comparative literature or world literature.

Nationalism and positivism are discredited in much of postwar scholarship, and comparative literature, especially in what Guillén calls its "American hour", puts emphasis on parallel study as a way to open up possibilities of comparison based on affinities in ideas, images, and themes, which can be found in different literary and artistic works without necessarily being determined by a route of factually established contact or influence.[6] The influence of one writer or one literature on another can hardly be the defining factor in literary creation; after all, none of Shakespeare's plays is completely original or lacks its specific source, influence, or a prior work, upon which the bard based his unique re-creation. Therefore, the search for influence or indebtedness, what René Wellek sarcastically calls the "foreign trade" of literature,

[4] Claudio Guillén, *The Challenge of Comparative Literature*, trans. Cola Franzen, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993, p. 41.

[5] Guyard, *La littérature comparée* (see note 3), p. 57.

[6] See Guillén, *The Challenge of Comparative Literature* (see note 4), pp. 60-68.

has serious limitations in comparative studies.[7] Given the imbalance of power between the West and the Rest in the global economic and political arena, however, the cosmopolitan vision in Goethe's *Weltliteratur* is still an unfulfilled ideal, East-West literary comparison remains a rarity, and comparative literature is still largely Eurocentric. Even in the new idea of world literature with a genuine desire to go beyond Eurocentrism, some of the current discussions are still under the shadow of Eurocentric pretensions. Take, for example, Pascale Casanova's idea of *la république mondiale des lettres* and her description of its formation and expansion as a historical process:

> Renaissance Italy, fortified by its Latin heritage, was the first recognized literary power. Next came France, with the rise of the Pléiade in the mid-sixteenth century, which in challenging both the hegemony of Latin and the advance of Italian produced a first tentative sketch of transnational literary space. Then Spain and England, followed by the rest of the countries of Europe, gradually entered into competition on the strength of their own literary "assets" and traditions. The nationalist movements that appeared in central Europe during the nineteenth century—a century that also saw the arrival of North America and Latin America on the international literary scene—generated new claims to literary existence. Finally, with decolonization, countries in Africa, the Indian subcontinent, and Asia demanded access to literary legitimacy and existence as well.[8]

In Casanova's presentation, world literary history started in Renaissance Europe and gradually moved to other parts of the world along with the expansion of European power in the nineteenth century, followed by twentieth-century decolonization in Africa and Asia. She lays a particular emphasis on Paris as the capital of the "world republic of letters", and she presumes that her Paris-centered literary space was based on historical facts: "[...] the claim that Paris is the capital of literature is not an effect of Gallocentrism but the result of a careful historical analysis showing that the exceptional concentration of literary resources that occurred in Paris over the course of several centuries gradually led to its recognition as the center of the literary world."[9] But surely human history is much longer than the modern period since the Renaissance, and the world as a whole, with important multiple centers, is far larger than Paris. One may wonder what Casanova would say about Greek and Roman literature, or literature in Biblical antiquity? One may also wonder whether she is aware of the existence of other powerful centers of cultural and literary activities outside Europe, such as the Persian

7 René Wellek, "The Crisis of Comparative Literature", in: Stephen Nichols (ed.), *Concepts of Criticism*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963, p. 283.
8 Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004, p. 11.
9 Pp. 46-47.

and Ottoman Empires, or imperial China which functioned as a center in the East Asian region long before the European Renaissance? One would assume that such basic and large-scale historical facts were taught even in French *lycées*, but how could 'a careful historical analysis' have missed all that and become so blind to much of the world outside France? Casanova's book has gained quite some popularity and critical acclaim as an important contribution to the study of world literature, and perhaps deservedly so; one would only wish that her notion of the world literary space could match more accurately a reliable historical map of the world.

Franco Moretti is another important figure in the study of world literature, whose proposal of 'distant reading' offers a good solution to the problem of the insurmountable amount of textual materials in world literature, the impossibility of reading even a tiny fraction of the world's literary works. "Distant reading", Moretti argues, "[...] allows you to focus on units that are much smaller or much larger than the text: devices, themes, tropes – or genres and systems."[10] The pattern of such units can be discerned in 'distant reading', but 'distant reading' must also be complemented by 'close reading' that pays sufficient attention to individual texts and textual details. Moretti's major contribution lies in the area of narrative fiction, particularly the study of the modern novel as a literary genre. He argues that the development of the novel in the world's different literature follows a pattern of moving from European centers of metropolitan culture to non-European peripheries, "[...] as a compromise between a western formal influence (usually French or English) and local materials."[11] Even though useful to a considerable degree, the center-periphery model, if applied mechanically, would obscure the complex relationship between the novel as an imported Western form and the local context with its indigenous narrative tradition, which cannot be considered as just passive "local materials" to be shaped into the new form of a modern novel.

In China, for example, famous novels like the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and *Water Margin* already appeared in the fourteenth century, some two hundred years before *Don Quixote*, and the great eighteenth-century Chinese novel *Hong lou meng* (*Dream of the Red Chamber*, also known as *The Story of the Stone*) remains a major influence on almost all modern Chinese writers. Though the modern novel as an imported form does have a great influence on Chinese literature of the twentieth century, the classical tradition and particularly the indigenous vernacular novels form the roots

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[10] Franco Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature", *New Left Review* 1/2000, pp. 55, 57.
[11] P. 58.

and the main trunk for any grafting of a foreign form onto the living tree of Chinese literature as a whole. In the early twentieth century, even the most radical iconoclastic figures of the May Fourth generation of Chinese intellectuals did not embrace the novel as a Western formal influence without looking back in the indigenous tradition for resources to cultivate its growth. Lu Xun (1881-1936) wrote one of the earliest histories of classical Chinese fiction and skillfully combined the old and the new in his own influential short stories, and Hu Shih (1891-1962) advocated the reexamination of China's classical tradition and opened up new approaches to the study of *Hong lou meng*, which have remained influential ever since. The history of the modern novel in the periphery is not just the story of how an imported Western form changes the local literary scene, but also, and perhaps more significantly, that of how the Western form itself is changed in its encounter with the indigenous narrative tradition, and of how the novel as a dynamic form gradually moves from the periphery towards the center. As David Damrosch observes, "[...] works become world literature by being received *into* the space of a foreign culture, a space defined in many ways by the host culture's national tradition and the present need of its own writers."[12] This is true of literary genres as well as of individual literary works.

It is obvious but nonetheless important to note that the 'world' in 'world literature' is a geographical term that covers the entire globe, not just one part or region, be it Europe, America, Asia, Africa, or any other such denominations. To take the 'world' seriously in 'world literature' thus immediately has two implications – first, any study of world literature must cover a large area across linguistically or culturally homogeneous or affiliated regions, beyond the European language groups or East Asian language groups, and must consider literary works from different continents. The cultural cartography is important here, to make sure that we are not limited to one region but make a claim to have global or universal significance. That brings us to the second implication, namely the linguistic difficulty of reading works in very different language groups with adequate understanding, and the solution to that problem puts translation in a very important place in world literature. David Damrosch regards world literature as "*writing that gains in translation*".[13] Indeed, it is translation that enables a literary work to speak to readers beyond its original, national milieu and to acquire a new lease of life in a different linguistic community. That means that world literature necessarily has translation as an important element, but its main concern is not

[12] David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003, p. 283.
[13] P. 288, emphasis in the original text.

the theoretical debate of untranslatability and its misleading concept of cultural incommensurability, or the subjectivity of the translator and the misleading opacity of the translated text, but the actual translation and its quality, the level of equivalence with the original, and the ways in which translation achieves such equivalence in various degrees. World literature will promote a whole new way of thinking about translation that acknowledges the true contribution of literary translation, its challenge, its functionality, and its ingenious creativity.

World literature is on the rise as the world we live in is changing, and there are undeniable correlations between the literary and cultural side of world affairs and the economical and political side. While there has been much critique of Eurocentrism, there has also been much talk today about the boom of the Asian economy and the ascendance of the global south, particularly the rise of China in international economy and politics. It is a shallow misunderstanding, however, to take cultural changes and transformations as nothing but pale reflections of the situation of global political economy. Narrow-minded nationalism is dangerous wherever it arises. The point of going beyond Eurocentrism is not to replace it with Sinocentrism or any other ethnocentrism, and in this context we may do well to recall Goethe's concept of *Weltliteratur* and its cosmopolitan vision, which should help us form a global perspective and a pluralistic outlook in recognizing all literature as equally meaningful, and in understanding and appreciating different literary works in ways that are not possible when those works are isolated from one another, within the limits of national enclosures. If comparative literature as a discipline has always tried to go beyond the limitations of national literatures, world literature today is building up the momentum to embrace a truly global perspective for literary studies. World literature with its conceptual openness or flexibility, which makes it possible for previously isolated or neglected regions to introduce their best works to join the traditionally well-established literary canon, is expanding our horizon and effectively changing our views of the world and its richness in literature and culture. And that, the cosmopolitan vision we all need in our world today, is the particular relevance of the idea of *Weltliteratur*.

Zhang Longxi
12 A Cherry Crest
3 Kui In Fong
Sheung Wan, Hong Kong
ctlxzh@cityu.edu.hk